

KENTUCKY AVENUE
Washington
District of Columbia

HABE NO. DC-701

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

KENTUCKY AVENUE

HABS No. DC-701

Location: Kentucky Avenue originates on the south side of Lincoln Park near Twelfth Street, SE, and continues in a straight line southeast to the Anacostia River.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government; the paved roadways, sidewalks, and the planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. The reservations are all managed by the District of Columbia Department of Recreation.

Present Use: This minor thoroughfare serves mostly local traffic.

Significance: This avenue was developed according to the L'Enfant and Ellicott plans. All reservations on the avenue have remained basically intact since their official recognition in 1894; one still contains fencing dating to the 1920s. The northern two blocks of the avenue, from Lincoln Square to South Carolina Avenue, are within the National Register Capital Hill Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792 Ellicott Plan.
2. Initial and subsequent improvements: The roadway was initially graded and paved between ca. 1895-1905.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the city, this avenue originates at a large rectangular park (Lincoln Park) marked with a "B," designating it as the site of "an historical column from which all locations throughout the country are located." It is a mirror image of Tennessee Avenue, which originates from the north side of Lincoln Park. Together, Tennessee and Kentucky avenues roughly follow the path of an historic route called Ferry Road that came from the north, travelling southwest along the line of Tennessee Avenue, turning at the site planned for Lincoln Park to continue southeast along the path of Kentucky Avenue to the narrowest crossing point on the Anacostia River. A ferry at this crossing lent the historic road its name.

On L'Enfant's plan, the planned avenue heads southeast from Lincoln Square at 147 degrees to a circle north of the Anacostia River. L'Enfant's plan shows a drawbridge at the base of the avenue extending it in a straight line over the river. South Carolina Avenue originates from this avenue three blocks south of Lincoln Park and it intersects with another avenue (today's Potomac Avenue) about two blocks north of the Anacostia River. Andrew Ellicott's plan of 1792 closely follows L'Enfant's ideas except that South Carolina Avenue, originating two blocks to the east at Massachusetts Avenue crosses through Kentucky Avenue.

The land for the roadway, acquired by the federal government in 1791, ran

through property owned by Abraham Young and George Walker.¹ According to a topographic map drawn from early surveys, the avenue then originated at one of the highest points in the city, Lincoln Park, and continued gradually down hill to the river's edge.²

As L'Enfant planned, a bridge was built over the Anacostia River on line with this avenue in 1804 and was rebuilt in 1815 after being burned down by the British in 1814. Steamboat sparks ignited the bridge again in 1845, but it was not replaced until 1887. At that time an iron and masonry bridge was erected on axis with the more travelled Pennsylvania Avenue.³

Despite Kentucky Avenue's former use as ferry road and its proximity to the Anacostia River, it remained largely undeveloped until the turn of the century. Although a circular park was planned at the south end of the avenue, the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G), charged with maintaining the city's parks, reported in the 1880-90s that much of the area was under water at high tide. Furthermore, the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington Railroad gained rights to the reservation in 1867 in order to construct a rail crossing over the Anacostia. This bridge, rebuilt in 1919, remains in place today.

The large reservation at the north end of the avenue was landscaped between 1874-76 with elaborate meandering paths, trees, shrubs, and flowerbeds. Named for Abraham Lincoln, a statue of the slain leader was erected in the center of the park, amid great ceremony, in 1876. The improved park spawned development in the neighborhood, and by the 1890s the block south of the pleasure ground featured several elegant homes. In keeping with this development, between 1895 and 1903 the commissioners of the District of Columbia graded the northernmost block of the avenue and paved it with gravel. The OPB&G, which oversaw the improvement of parks along newly improved roadways, sodded and graded the triangular parks at the intersection of Independence Avenue in 1901 (Reservation Nos. 259 and 260). By 1904 they were both surrounded with ornamental post-and-chain fences.

Groupings of row houses soon followed between D and E streets, and the nearby parks--Reservation Nos. 262 and 263--were improved in 1904-05. A few more homes were erected along the route between 1903 and 1909, but the following decade brought the greatest growth, and most of the vacant lots were developed by 1920. Except for the early elegant homes near Lincoln Park, the rowhouses framing the avenue were modest, three-story dwellings with wide front porches facing onto the street.

The avenue has changed very little since its initial development. It remains a residential street, with several modern additions, such as a large grocery store at the D Street intersection. The road width has remained basically the same since it was first graded and cleared.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

¹ As indicated on Toner's map of 1874.

² Hawkins, 19, 29, 33.

³ Myer, 47.

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: The avenue is 120' wide from building line to building line.
2. Length within city limits: The entire avenue is within the historic city limits and is approximately 1 mile long.

B. Elements within the right-of-way:

1. Roadway: The approximately 40'-wide roadway supports parallel street parking and two-way traffic from Twelfth to 15th street and one-way northbound traffic from 15th Street to Barney Circle. Medians were inserted in the roadbed in 1957 to regulate traffic. Assigned reservation numbers at that time, they are described as follows:
 - a. Reservation No. 701: Center of the avenue, north of Independence Avenue, west of 13th Street, SE (4,672 square feet). This small triangular sodded median has a concrete sidewalk along Independence Avenue. It was transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1972.
 - b. Reservation No. 702: Center of the avenue, south of Independence Avenue, east of 13th Street, SE (1,144 square feet). This oval median strip has concrete pavers on the north side and sod covers the remainder except a sunken concrete curb cut in the middle facilitating handicapped crossing. It was transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1972.
2. Sidewalks and street trees: Elms are planted in cutouts in the brick and concrete-paver sidewalks. Toward the north end of the avenue these trees are more mature and form a canopy over the roadway. Residents have planted ivy in some of the cutouts at the tree bases.
3. Large reservations:
 - a. The avenue originates at Lincoln Park, Reservation No. 14 (See HABS No. DC-677).
 - b. A circular park was planned at the terminus of the avenue on the Anacostia River, but it was never fully realized. Officially designated Barney Circle in 1911, Reservation Nos. 55 and 56 were used as a streetcar and bus turn-around loop and terminal from 1939 to 1960. In the early 1970s the circle was covered with the freeway ramps leading to the Southeast/Southwest Freeway and the John Phillip Sousa Bridge.⁴
4. Smaller reservations: The following list describes the location of each reservation identified along this avenue by 1894, the date it was first

⁴ Eisen, 1971.

recognized as federal property, the date of transfer, the date of first improvement, if known, and a description its appearance historically and as of summer 1990. In 1972, jurisdiction of all the smaller reservations along Kentucky Avenue was transferred to the District of Columbia along with about 300 other reservations throughout the city. Since 1989 they have been maintained by the DC Department of Recreation.

- a. Reservation No. 259: Northeast of the avenue, west of 13th Street, north of Independence Avenue, SE (2,772 square feet). This triangular reservation abutting City Square No. I013 was officially identified in 1884 and was first improved in 1901. By 1904 it featured a cast-iron post-and-chain fence. A median, Reservation No. 701 was carved from its tip in 1957, thereby reducing the size of the park. Today it is surrounded by a concrete perimeter walk, the curbside on the east featuring grass and trees. Plantings include grass, a shrub bed, and a shade tree. A dirt path has been worn across the reservation.
- b. Reservation No. 260: Southwest of the avenue and east of 13th Street, SE (544 square feet). Originally identified in 1884, this triangular reservation abuts City Square No. E1015 which now contains a two-story apartment building. It was first improved in 1901 and by 1904 featured a cast-iron post-and-chain fence. In 1957, a median, Reservation No. 702, was carved from its tip. Today a deciduous shrub hedge lining the sides of the triangle facing the street is delineated by quarter-round coping. The line of the bushes continues into the abutting property along a metal hairpin fence probably owned by the neighboring property owner.
- c. Reservation No. 261: Northeast of the avenue, west of 14th Street, north of D Street, SE (1,944 square feet). This triangular reservation was originally identified in 1884 abutting City Square No. S1039, now occupied by a liquor store. It is delineated by quarter-round coping with corner blocks on the corners closest to the abutting property line. It is surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks with curbside grass and trees. The triangle is planted with an overgrown deciduous hedge and turf.
- d. Reservation No. 262: Southwest of the avenue, east of 14th Street, and south of D Street, SE (1,152.00 square feet). Originally identified in 1884, this triangle abutting City Square No. E1042 was first improved in 1904-5. It is now separated from the abutting property by a brick walk. Brick also paves the walks along Kentucky Avenue and 14th Street that are flanked by curbside sodding and trees. The park features an amorphous shrub mass and scattered holly bushes.
- e. Reservation No. 263: Northeast of the avenue, west of 15th Street, SE (1,484 square feet). Officially identified in 1884, this triangular reservation abuts City Square No. E1063, occupied by houses built around 1900. It is surrounded on two sides by concrete perimeter

walks with curbside grass and trees. The reservation contains a dense mass of shrubs and weeds. It is still surrounded by the cast-iron post-and-chain fence erected during its first improvement in 1904-05. All of the posts lack finials except one near the northwest corner.

- f. Reservation No. 264: Southwest of the avenue, east of 15th Street, north of G Street, SE (1,910 square feet). Officially identified in 1887, this triangular reservation is now surrounded by concrete sidewalks with curbside turf and trees on Kentucky Avenue and G Street and a brick sidewalk abutting 15th Street. Located in the center of an active intersection, it is landscaped with grass and two shade trees on the 15th Street side.
- g. Reservation No. 265: Northeast of the avenue, west of 16th Street, north of H Street, SE (1,208.00 square feet). This triangular reservation abutting City Square No. W1092 was officially identified in 1884. It is now surrounded by concrete perimeter walks, those abutting streets having curbside grass and trees. The interior sodded space features a deciduous hedge and quarter-round coping.

- 5. Front yards: Basically a residential street, front yards are individually maintained, and often enclosed with fences or stone retaining walls.

- C. Framing elements: The avenue retains a quiet residential quality featuring a relatively continuous line of attached two- and three-story houses built largely within the first two decades of the twentieth century.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Army Corps of Engineers. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

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Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Toner, Joseph M. "Sketch of Washington in Embryo." 1874.

B. Early Views:

1927-29: Photograph of each reservation taken during a city wide survey (HSW Reservations Collection).

C. Bibliography:

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Eisen, Jack. "Barney Circle Gone, But Will Return," Washington Post. 19 June 1971.

Hawkins, Don A. "The Landscape of the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer 1991), 10-33.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

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